

EXHIBIT 75

Jail Unions Gain a Powerful Supporter: The New Mayor

Eric Adams has reversed some measures enacted to regain control over the crisis at Rikers Island, in an early victory for the correction officers’ unions.

By Jan Ransom
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Vincent N. Schiraldi, the commissioner of the New York City Department of Correction, was struggling to restore order in the Rikers Island jail complex when he asked a jail union boss for a meeting in the fall.

The reply he received was blunt, Mr. Schiraldi said in an interview. The union leader, Patrick Ferraiuolo, president of the Correction Captains Association, refused — confident that the reform-minded commissioner, who had angered the unions with his oversight policies, would be replaced when Eric Adams took over as mayor. “You’re gone,” he said.

Within weeks, that prediction came to pass.

The advance knowledge of Mr. Schiraldi’s firing offered an early hint at how closely aligned Mr. Adams had become with the city’s powerful correction unions even before he took office. It also foreshadowed a series of pro-labor decisions he would make almost immediately after his swearing-in, actions that the former commissioner and some advocates say signal a return to prominence for unions that had been put on the defensive in the final months of the previous administration.

Flanked by union representatives last month, Mr. Adams announced that he would reinstate solitary confinement as a tool for managing detainees, a policy the correction officers’ union had pushed in the face of Mayor Bill de Blasio’s decision to eliminate it.

Two weeks ago, on the same day, Louis A. Molina, Mr. Adams’s choice to replace Mr. Schiraldi, rolled back restrictions on the department’s generous sick leave policy and fired the department’s top internal investigator, whose aggressive investigations into officers’ use of force had also drawn the unions’ ire. It was Mr. Molina’s first Monday on the job.

In an interview last week, the internal investigator, Sarena Townsend, said she had been dismissed after becoming alarmed at a request from Mr. Molina that she “get rid of” 2,000 discipline cases pending against jail officers in 100 days. She said he had asked if the department could dismiss some of the cases or issue light penalties in others. “I was uneasy,” Ms. Townsend said, adding that she believes she was fired at the behest of the union.

“I don’t believe the unions should be running agencies,” she said. “This makes me believe this is the first of many deals that might be happening, and that’s not effective leadership.”



Sarena Townsend, the former deputy commissioner of intelligence, believes the union got her fired. Hiram Alejandro Durán/THE CITY

“We’re alarmed,” said Mary Lynne Werlwas, the director of the Prisoners’ Rights Project at the Legal Aid Society. “This is not explainable as good governance, it’s not explainable as boosting morale.”

In a statement, a Correction Department spokeswoman declined to address the firing but said commissioners have “full discretion on personnel decisions.” She dismissed the notion that Mr. Molina would ask Ms. Townsend to ignore discipline cases and said he is focused on making the jails safer for both officers and detainees.

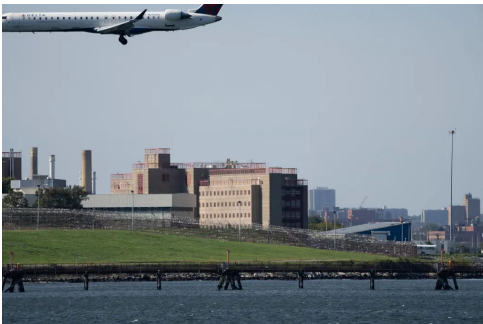
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Asked about the firing at a jail oversight hearing on Tuesday, Mr. Molina did not offer an explanation, but he said: “Accountability through fair and appropriate discipline is essential in this department. Improving staff morale is also essential.”

Benny Boscio, the president of the Correction Officers’ Benevolent Association, did not respond to requests for comment. But on a recent video on Instagram Live, he said his goal was to improve working conditions in the jails.

“We want to bring our agency back to where it used to be so that everybody feels safe,” Mr. Boscio said. “That’s the biggest concern that we have: safety and security. We’ve lost control of Rikers — that’s due to no fault of our own.”

Mr. Adams has taken over at a time when Rikers Island is reeling from its worst crisis since the crack epidemic overburdened the jail system in the early 1990s. Hundreds of officers have failed to show up for work, leaving critical guard posts in detainee housing units unfilled. Violent incidents have soared, gang members have gained control over parts of some jail buildings and detainees have gone without food or basic medical care.



Jail Unions Gain Powerful Supporter: Mayor Eric Adams / The New York Times
 Rikers Island has been plagued by disorder and violence during the pandemic. U.S. Sent
 for The New York Times

Last month, The New York Times reported that much of the violence and disorder on Rikers stems from decades of mismanagement by city leaders, who allowed power to shift from department administrators to the unions and then to detainees. The missteps gave rise to a system in which guards are assigned to posts in arbitrary and wasteful ways and officers can abuse sick leave benefits, often with impunity.

“The unions are going to fight for their members,” Mr. Schiraldi said in the interview. “They’re going to fight for the best possible deal. We’ve got to be the grown-ups — and say no. It’s been decades of letting the unions run roughshod.”



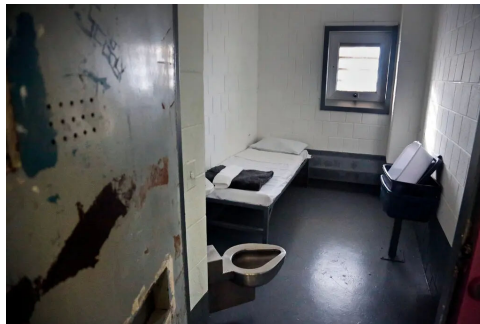
The former correction commissioner, Vincent Schiraldi, said the unions “run roughshod.” Jeenah Moon/Associated Press

Accommodating the unions

Mr. Adams, who assiduously courted the correction unions during his mayoral campaign, began signaling a desire to accommodate them soon after winning the Democratic primary last summer.

As conditions on Rikers Island were deteriorating, he attempted to make his first tour of the jail complex on a visit organized by the unions, not city officials, Mr. Schiraldi said — a breach of protocol. The visit eventually was canceled.

On a rescheduled visit in September, led by Mr. Schiraldi, Mr. Adams asked why order still had not been restored, Mr. Schiraldi recalled. The former jails commissioner replied that too many guards were not showing up to work, leaving posts unfilled and creating dangerous conditions in intake areas and detainee housing units.



Mayor Eric Adams said he would bring back solitary confinement in jails. Bebeto Matthews/Associated Press

Standing at Mr. Adams’s side, the union leaders interrupted, saying the city needed to hire more officers and that their members were genuinely sick.

Records and interviews show that New York’s is actually the best-staffed big-city jail in America, with staffing problems that arise not from a shortage of available guards but from decisions by jail managers to assign officers to work elsewhere while detainee guard posts go unfilled.

At the news conference at Brooklyn Borough Hall when Mr. Adams vowed to restore solitary confinement for violent detainees, a mayoral aide tried to move representatives from the jail unions away from the incoming mayor’s lectern. Mr. Adams paused the event and said, “I want my unions here with me. We’re partners here.”

Two days later, Mr. Molina met with the union leaders for a four-hour lunch at a Queens restaurant, listening as they spoke of a need for more officers, shared videos illustrating the dangers their members face on the job and criticized the disciplinary actions taken against staff under the de Blasio administration. Mr. Molina promised to make the jails safer, said Mr. Ferraiuolo, president of the captains’ union, who attended the lunch.

On Jan. 3, Mr. Molina reversed changes to the department’s sick leave policy that were intended to cut down on abuse. The correction officers’ union — which has secured unlimited sick leave for its members since the 1970s, a benefit that other uniformed unions also have — argued that the change was punitive and caused officers to remain out of work longer.

And last week, Mr. Adams named Philip Banks III, a former chief of the New York Police Department, as deputy mayor for public safety, giving him broad authority over the city’s criminal justice agencies. Once named as an unindicted co-conspirator in a wide-ranging corruption investigation, Mr. Banks was a close friend of Norman Seabrook, the powerful leader of the correction officers’ union who was convicted on federal bribery charges in 2018.



Jail Unions Gain a Powerful Supporter: Mayor Eric Adams / The New York Times
Benny Boscio Jr., president of the Correction Officers' Benevolent Association. A predecessor, Norman Seabrook, was convicted of bribery. Anna Watts for The New York Times

Firing the investigator

On the same day that he reversed the sick leave policy, Mr. Molina fired Ms. Townsend, the chief investigator.

As recently as last month, a federal monitor appointed to oversee improvements on Rikers Island had described Ms. Townsend as “critical to the success of this reform effort moving forward,” lauding her competence in pursuing discipline cases against officers who use force inappropriately, among other things.

But the unions had come to loathe her for that work in particular.

As deputy commissioner for intelligence, investigation and trials, she had also been responsible for reviewing certain allegations of sick leave abuse, including an incident on Columbus Day in which more than a dozen correction officers at a Queens courthouse left in ambulances to avoid being deployed to Rikers Island.

She was also scrutinizing an incident in August during which dozens of transport officers claimed that more than 40 of their buses were too broken down to drive, causing detainees to miss court dates and creating further disorder on Rikers and in the court system.

Frustrated, the unions launched an online petition calling for Ms. Townsend's firing, recording at least 290 signatures. A video posted by the jail officers' union over the summer attacked conditions in the jails and celebrated the resignation of the jails commissioner at the time, Mr. Schiraldi's predecessor. It ended with the words “Who's next?” overlaid on photos of five other administrators, including Ms. Townsend.

In December, Ms. Townsend said, Mr. Molina asked her if she could get rid of the 2,000 disciplinary cases, in a meeting first reported by The New York Daily News.

They agreed to meet again in January, on Mr. Molina's first Monday on the job. She was fired that day, told by human resources that the “commissioner is going in a different direction.” She said she was escorted out of the department's headquarters in Queens.

Ms. Townsend's firing, which was first reported by the local news website The City, is not the first time correction officials have ousted a top department investigator who had made enemies of the jail unions. Under the de Blasio administration, in 2014, the Correction Department forced the resignation of another official who held a position similar to Ms. Townsend's, Florence Finkle.

At a news conference last week, Mr. Adams said he supported his commissioner's decision, adding that the dysfunction in the jails is “unacceptable.”

“No matter who is assigned there,” Mr. Adams said, “the people of this city are going to ask, ‘Did you fix the problem?’”

Nicholas Fandos contributed reporting.

Jan Ransom is an investigative reporter on the Metro Desk focusing on criminal justice issues, law enforcement and incarceration in New York. More about Jan Ransom

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